

Native and Non-native Teacher: A Matter to Think Over

By Andrea Machado de Almeida Mattos

Ever since I started teaching English as a foreign language in my country, I have been concerned with the role of the non-professional native teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL). In Brazil a non-English speaking country, this has been a most serious matter for many English schools, particularly private language institutes, since hiring good teachers directly contributes to the survival of the institution.

My intention here is not to take sides. My sole objective is to point out some of the pros and cons of having either the one or the other, and to try to reach some possible conclusions.

For the purpose of this article, I will be referring to English as the target language (L2) and to the student's own language (i.e., Portuguese) as the mother tongue (L1). Similarly, in mentioning native teacher, I mean a native speaker of English, in contrast to a non-native teacher, who usually is a speaker of the student's mother tongue and has learnt English in Brazil or, in most cases, during home stays abroad, lasting generally one year.

I am not implying that native speakers of English do not make good teachers. Far from that: Many of them have been teaching for several years and do know enough to be called Teachers (with a capital T). In my opinion, what really counts is not the amount of time a teacher has spent in the L2 country, but the amount of energy s/he has dedicated to studying the English language and its teaching methodology.

Native and Non-native

In Brazil-and I believe this to be true of most underdeveloped non- English speaking countries-it seems that language institutes appreciate and want native teachers. The reason is quite clear: They attract students. This is especially the case in small private language schools, which many times prefer to hire a native- speaker of the target language rather than a more experienced non-native teacher. The main interest is to maintain the number of students on safe, profitable ground.

From the point of view of the student, it is wonderful to have a native teacher. Every learner dreams of practicing conversation with a native speaker. Think of all the slang and colloquial vocabulary items a native teacher can provide, besides helping with special usages and tricky pronunciation problems. Moreover, if the native teacher also speaks the student's mother tongue, s/he never has the fear of not knowing a mispronounced word. Instead the teacher can bridge the gap between the student's pronunciation and the correct target word.

Nevertheless, the non-native teacher also has advantages, especially if s/he is an experienced teacher with a broad knowledge of both English and the student's mother tongue. S/he can, for instance, make comparisons between the grammar of English and the grammar of the mother tongue in order to help students overcome difficulties in understanding and/or producing new structures. However, a non-native teacher will certainly have drawbacks in some of the English language areas-the pronunciation of certain words, or the difference between short and long vowel sounds (eg., /i/- /I/), something remarkably difficult for Brazilian students, as well as complex areas such as the use of definite articles.

Culture Knowledge

Although helping students acquire the grammar and lexis of the target language is obviously important, it is equally important to encourage students' interest in the culture(s) of L2. Here, the native teacher has a definite advantage. Still, many cultural aspects might be taken for granted by a native teacher and, therefore, might not be treated relevantly. Thus, a non-native teacher with a rich L2 culture knowledge would serve the same purpose just as well.

Translation

Translation is another problem in EFL teaching. On the one hand, the non-native teacher might comfortably rely on word-by-word translation, perhaps more than necessary. On the other hand, the native teacher, might struggle to explain such concepts as "although" or the difference between "lend" and "borrow," items which could easily be taught with the help of the student's mother tongue.

The Non-teacher

The major problem, however, is that native teachers many times are not "real" teachers but merely native speakers of the target language. Many of them have little or no training in teaching. Therefore, they might have problems in explaining some features of the English language. The present perfect tense, for example, which has no equivalent in Portuguese, is one area of great difficulty. Furthermore, teaching methodology might be something completely alien to them. Activities such as planning a unit or a lesson, or establishing teaching objectives might prove to be complicated tasks, and expressions such as "learning strategies" or "communicative competence" might be as familiar to them as the weather on the moon.

No doubt native teachers attract students, but eventually they may let their students down. My opinion is that good language schools are made of good language programs, good materials, and good teachers. Thus, the odds are in favor of the experienced non-native teacher over a native non- teacher.

Andrea Machado de Almeida Mattos has been teaching EFL since 1982 in several private language institutes.

References

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